

**The Empire at War:  
British and Indian Perceptions of Empire  
in the First World War**

**By**

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# Introduction: The Indian Army in World War One

This thesis will examine the perceptions of Empire among soldiers of different backgrounds fighting for the Indian Army in World War One (WWI). Within the army at this time, there was a mix of Indian and British officers in command of rank-and-file soldiers of Indian background. I will ask how deep was the attachment to the British Raj and the ideology of Empire on both sides and examine how the experience of war changed the perceptions of British commanders, British junior officers and the Indian soldiers.

The primary sources used are mostly published memoirs, diaries and letters by soldiers who fought in WWI. I will be looking at the perceptions of the individuals who produced the primary source material. The methodology for this study is to focus on the language and descriptive techniques of the soldiers writing. The tone of the sources is important, in discussing the author's mindset at the time of writing. From this we can see how their language changed through reactions to WWI.<sup>1</sup> Some memoirs, written after the events in question, lack immediacy, but are still useful as they can tell us what remained in the author's memory, which tells us what was important to them.<sup>2</sup> We can still learn of the perceptions of the time, by what stands out in the memory of the author. We can see what is remembered and how.

The Indian Army began with the competition between the French and the British in the initial struggle for India, but it did not take the shape it held in WWI until 1858.<sup>3</sup> The system of rank in the Indian Army at this time was unique. The non-commissioned ranks were similar to those of the British Army, with Indian ranks corresponding to British ranks, such as private, corporal or sergeant. The Indian officers were unique. They were subordinate to all British officers, intended as the

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<sup>1</sup> For examples of similar methodology see, for example: J. M. Winter, *The Great War and the British People* (Basingstoke, 1985), pp. 279-305 and J. M. Winter, *The Experience of World War One* (Edinburgh, 1990).

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of how the mind remembers, see: A. M. Hoffman and H. S. Hoffman, 'Memory Theory: Personal and Social', in T. L. Charlton *et al.*, *Handbook of Oral History* (New York, 2006), pp. 275-296. For a useful discussion of memory with regard to WWI see: A. Thompson, *ANZAC Memories: Living with the Legend* (Melbourne, 1994). For more perspectives on memory in history see, for example: D. Middleton and D. Edwards, 'Introduction', in D. Middleton and D. Edwards (eds), *Collective Remembering* (London, 1990), pp. 1-22 and J. Le Goff, *History and Memory* (New York, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> P. Mason, *A Matter of Honour: An Account of the Indian Army, Its Officers and Men* (London, 1974).

link between Indian rankers and the British officers.<sup>4</sup> In 1914, the Indian Army consisted of 159,000 Indian officers and men, along with 2,300 British officers.<sup>5</sup> By the end of 1914, they made up almost one-third of the British Expeditionary Force in France.<sup>6</sup> On the Western Front, the Indian Army lost 500 British officers, 500 Indian officers, and 20,000 other ranks.<sup>7</sup> The Indian Army fought on the Western Front from 1914-1915, but the infantry were removed to the Middle East in late 1915. The cavalry remained until 1918, though did not see much action.<sup>8</sup> Each Indian Army battalion arrived in France with 750 Indian officers and men, and usually 11 or 12 British officers, considerably fewer than in the British Army.<sup>9</sup>

The analysis will be divided into three chapters. Chapter One will discuss the perceptions of the British commanders of the Indians' role in the Indian Army. Chapter Two will focus on the British junior officers, who had a combat role in WWI, and who had a closer relationship with the Indians. Chapter Three will examine the Indian perspective, discussing the perceptions of their role in the Indian Army and the Empire, and how it was affected by their experience of war. The focus of discussion will differ between the chapters. The British commanders and junior officers all discuss the Indian soldiers directly. The Indian soldiers mostly comment on the Indian Army or the British government as a whole, rather than any individual officer. The use of these sources can give a new perspective on debates over how the concept of martial races affected the British and how WWI affected loyalty to the Empire.

The historiography of the Indian Army in WWI began with a semi-official history by Merewether and Smith published in 1919.<sup>10</sup> A few memoirs were then published, mostly from the high command, such as *With the Indians in France* by General James Willcox.<sup>11</sup> Many letters and diaries have been published only recently,

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<sup>4</sup> Willcox, *With the Indians in France*, pp. 1-6; Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices of the Great War*, pp. xxi-xxii (page numbers given in roman numerals).

<sup>5</sup> D. E. Omissi, 'The Indian Army in the First World War, 1914-1918' in D. P. Marston, and C. S. Sundaram, *A Military History of India and South Asia - From the East India Company to the Nuclear Era* (New Delhi, 2007), pp. 74-75.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 74-78.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80-83.

<sup>9</sup> D. E. Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices of the Great War – Soldiers' Letters, 1914-1919* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. xxi-xxii (page numbers given in roman numerals).

<sup>10</sup> J. W. B. Merewether and F. Smith, *The Indian Corps in France* (London, 1919).

<sup>11</sup> J. Willcox, *With the Indians in France* (London, 1920).

some within the last 10 years. These publications have opened the subject up for further research and raised more questions. Very little secondary material was produced until Greenhut published some important articles in the 1980s on the relationship between the British and the Indian soldiers in the Indian Army. Martin wrote an article on the influence of racial attitudes on British policy towards India during WWI.<sup>12</sup> General histories of WWI, such as those by Strachan and Keegan for example, have discussed the Indian Army to some extent.<sup>13</sup> These works focus on their arrival at the Western Front, major battles, such as Neuve Chappelle and their early removal to the Middle Eastern Front, but do not explore issues raised in this thesis.<sup>14</sup>

Following these minor works, major studies have appeared with some regularity. David Omissi's research has been particularly important in increasing our understanding of Indian soldiers in WWI.<sup>15</sup> His collection of letters, though they have not yet been thoroughly analysed, presents a rich set of primary sources for this study. Ellinwood produced a study of the 44 years long diary of Amar Singh.<sup>16</sup> This work is

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<sup>12</sup> J. Greenhut, 'Shahib and Sepoy: An Inquiry into the Relationship between the British Officers and Native Soldiers of the British Indian Army', *Military Affairs* 48, 1 (1984), pp. 15-18; J. Greenhut, 'The Imperial Reserve: The Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914-1915', 12, 1, (1983) pp. 54-73 and J. Greenhut, 'Race, Sex and War: The Impact of Race and Sex on Morale and Health Services for the Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914', *Military Affairs*, 45, 2 (1981), pp. 71-74. G. Martin, 'The Influence of Racial Attitudes on British Policy Towards India during the First World War', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 14, 2 (1986), pp. 91-113.

<sup>13</sup> J. Keegan, *The First World War* (London, 1998), pp. 140-142. H. Strachan, *The First World War* (London, 2004), pp. 82-84.

<sup>14</sup> Neuve Chapelle was one of the major battles fought by the Indian Infantry on the Western Front. There were 4,200 Indian casualties. See: <http://www.firstworldwar.com/battles/neuvechappelle.htm>: date accessed Friday, 3 October, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> For Omissi's work, see: D. E. Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj* (Basingstoke, 1994); Omissi, 'The Indian Army in the First World War', pp. 74-87; D. E. Omissi, 'Europe through Indian Eyes: Indian Soldiers Encounter England and France, 1914-1918', *English Historical Review* 122, 498 (2007), pp. 371-296; D. E. Omissi, 'Sepoys in the Trenches: The Indian Corps on the Western Front 1914-1915 by Gordon Corrigan', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 29, 2 (2001), pp. 178-180; Omissi, (ed.), *Indian Voices* and D. E. Omissi, 'India: Some Perceptions of Race and Empire' in D. E. Omissi and A. S. Thompson (eds.), *The Impact of the South African War* (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 215-232. For a much smaller work on the letters of Indian soldiers from WWI with a very specific focus, see S. VanKoski, 'Letters Home, 1915-1916: Punjabi Soldiers Reflect on War and Life in Europe and their Meanings for Home and Self', *International Journal of Punjab Studies*, 2, (1995), pp. 43-63. For a recent and useful overview of the Indian role, and other 'underdeveloped' nations in WWI see B. Waites, 'Peoples of the Underdeveloped World' in H. Cecil and P. H. Liddle (eds.), *Facing Armageddon – The First World War Experienced* (Barnsley, 2003), pp. 596-614.

<sup>16</sup> D. C. Ellinwood, *Between Two Worlds: A Rajput Officer in the Indian Army, 1905-21* (Lanham, 2005). The Diary of Amar Singh has been published, but will not be used in this study as it is heavily edited, and does not contain any entries made during WWI. See S. H. Rudolph and L. I. Rudolph (eds.), *Reversing the Gaze: Amar Singh's Diary: A Colonial Subject's Narrative of Imperial India* (Boulder, 2002).

very descriptive, though it focuses just one man's experience and does not make broader arguments on the Indian war experience. Corrigan, a former Gurkha officer, produced a history of the Indian Army on the Western Front, arguing that the Indians fought with great skill and gallantry under difficult conditions.<sup>17</sup>

We must also look at the background of the Indian Army. The soldiers fighting were drawn mostly from the 'martial races' of India.<sup>18</sup> The classification was drawn from the Indian caste system and the self-image of some communities, such as the North-Indian Rajputs. As a result, over half the Indian Army in WWI was from a single community in the Punjab and the remainder from Nepal, the United Provinces and the North-West Frontier Province.<sup>19</sup> Regiments were usually segregated on the basis of religion, language and community. They were recruited from rural areas, often-backward ones.<sup>20</sup> The selection of sources in this study can give a new perspective on debates on how the idea of martial races affected the British and how WWI affected enthusiasm for the Empire. Understanding where the Indian soldiers came from is important in considering the soldiers' mentality in the trenches and their perceptions of the British Empire.<sup>21</sup>

The Raj has a very large historiography, so I will focus on cultural relations and racial attitudes within British India.<sup>22</sup> One of the major factors in this relationship was British racism.<sup>23</sup> The 'progressive' nature of Empire was particularly important as an element in British legitimization of their rule in India. I am interested in discussing how the concept of martial races was important as a factor in how British

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<sup>17</sup> G. Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches* (Stroud, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> On martial races, see for example: G. F. MacMunn, *The Martial Races of India* (London, 1933); Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*; L. Caplan, *Warrior Gentlemen: 'Gurkhas', in the Western Imagination* (Oxford, 1995) and H. Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914* (Manchester, 2004).

<sup>19</sup> Omissi, 'The Indian Army in the First World War', p. 75.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> On the recruitment for the Indian Army, see: K. Roy, *Brown Warriors of the Raj: Recruitment and the Mechanics of Command in the Sepoy Army, 1859-1913* (New Delhi, 2008) and Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 1-46.

<sup>22</sup> For a largely British perspective see: L. James, *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India* (New York, 1998). For studies of ideology and culture see: T. R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Melbourne, 2005); K. Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj* (London, 1980); H. Tinker, *Separate and unequal: India and the Indians in the British Commonwealth, 1920-1950* (St. Lucia, 1976). For a study of masculinity in the Empire see: P. F. McDevitt, 'May the Best Man Win' – *Sport, Masculinity, and Nationalism in Great Britain and the Empire, 1880-1935* (New York, 2004).

<sup>23</sup> This is often identified as an issue, for example: Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* and Ballhatchet, *Under the Raj*.



officers saw the Indian soldiers. This study will contribute to our understandings of how the Empire worked in the personal perceptions between ‘senior’ and ‘subordinate’ in the Empire’s hierarchy.

Over a large period, covering roughly the Indian Rebellion in 1857 to Partition in 1947, race relations within the Indian Army were delicate. Indianization gave expression to British racial approaches to the Indian Army. It was both a debate about how much power Indian officers should hold in the Indian Army and the process by which they were given more power.<sup>24</sup> A classic approach is provided by Sharpe, who argues that racism and prejudice made for painfully slow progress.<sup>25</sup> This thesis will demonstrate that the British officers’ opinions were more varied and diverse than has previously been acknowledged in the approach of Sharpe and others.

Ellis has produced a descriptive study of daily life in the trenches. He discusses aspects such as constant shelling, living in mud, the constant threat of death, injury and destruction, and the helpless vulnerability many felt.<sup>26</sup> There are also many collections of letters and diaries, which show primary source evidence of the different experiences. Many soldiers were disillusioned with the war, and became depressed, while others remained committed to their nation’s cause.<sup>27</sup> Widespread disillusionment has led Mann to argue that WWI was partly responsible for diminishing enthusiasm for the Empire.<sup>28</sup> However, the prominence of disillusionment in the trenches is still debated. Debate has centred on the effect of the

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<sup>24</sup> For discussion of Indianization see: Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*; Mason, *Honour*; A. Sharpe, ‘The Indianisation of the Indian Army’, *History Today*, 34 (March, 1986) pp.47-52 and S. P. Cohen, *The Indian Army Its Contribution to the Development of a Nation* (Berkeley, 1971). For an alternative approach to Indianization see: P. Barua, *Gentlemen of the Raj: The Indian Army Officer Corps, 1817-1949* (Westport, 2003).

<sup>25</sup> Sharpe, ‘Indianisation of the Indian Army’. Cohen, Mason and Omissi follow similar arguments. Sharpe’s is a brief article which provides an overview of their arguments. See: Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*; Mason, *Honour*; Cohen, *The Indian Army*.

<sup>26</sup> J. Ellis, *Eye-Deep in Hell: Trench Warfare in World War 1* (New York, 1976). For a discussion of why men fought, and how it affected them, see: N. Ferguson, *The Pity of War* (New York, 1999), pp. 346-366.

<sup>27</sup> There are many examples of such collections, but see for example: S. Palmer and S. Wallis (eds), *Intimate Voices of the First World War* (London, 2005); L. Macdonald (ed.), *1914-1918, Voices and Images of the Great War* (London, 1991) and M. Arthur (ed.), *Forgotten Voices of the Great War* (London, 2002).

<sup>28</sup> M. Mann, “‘Torchbearers Upon the Path of Progress’: Britain’s Ideology of a ‘Moral and Material Progress’ in India. An Introductory Essay”, in H. Fischer-Tiné and M. Mann (eds), *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission – Cultural Ideology in British India* (London, 2004), pp. 1-26. Mann is discussion disillusionment on the ‘home front’ as well as in the trenches.

trench experience on soldiers' pre-1914 beliefs. The 'traditionalist' approach suggests that WWI completely washed away soldiers pre-1914 ideals and that disillusionment was near universal.<sup>29</sup> 'Revisionist' historians have argued that the experience was far more varied and that many soldiers maintained their beliefs, or they were even strengthened.<sup>30</sup> The Indian Army has, so far, been left out of this debate. This thesis will add to our understanding of soldiers' previous ideals on the Western Front, by making the Indian Army the focus of discussion.

Some of the memoirs and diaries used in this study originate from the Middle Eastern front. All the major works on the Indian Army in WWI, including Omissi, Corrigan and Greenhut, focus on the Western Front and disregard the Middle Eastern Front.<sup>31</sup> The major works on the Middle Eastern front tend to be military histories.<sup>32</sup> These works offer very little in the way of insight into the personal relationships within the army. As I am focusing my discussion on the effect that war experience had on people's perceptions, these differences will be discussed only when they are relevant to these perceptions.

This study will contribute to knowledge by showing how the British junior officers' perceptions differed from those of the commanders. Many previous scholars have discussed British/Indian relations from the perspective of British generals and rulers. This will be the first study to look at the junior officers in the Indian Army in WWI from primary sources. I will compare their opinions with those of commanding officers, which will show how shared combat experience and a direct relationship

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<sup>29</sup> For examples of this approach, see: D. Winter, *Death's Men: Soldiers of the Great War* (Suffolk, 1978) and P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (New York, 1975).

<sup>30</sup> See, for example: B. Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front: Britain's Role in Literature and History* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 75-101; Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*; J. S. K. Watson, *Fighting Different Wars: Experience, Memory, and the First World War in Britain* (New York, 2004) and G. Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory: The First World War: Myths and Realities* (London, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*; Greenhut, 'The Imperial Reserve' and Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches*. All these works specifically focus on the Western Front.

<sup>32</sup> This is a flaw admitted by Omissi when he provides an overview of the period in his introduction to *Indian Voices of the Great War*. Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, pp. 1-22. For military histories WWI in the Middle East, see: A. J. Barker, *The Neglected War – Mesopotamia, 1914-1918* (London, 1967) and R. Willcox, *Battles on the Tigris - The Mesopotamian Campaign of the First World War* (Barnsley, 2006). For social war history, see D. R. Woodward, *Forgotten Soldiers of the First World War: Lost Voices from the Middle Eastern Front* (Stroud, 2006). For a discussion of life on the Middle Eastern front for the Indian Army, see M. Harrison, 'The Fight Against Disease in the Mesopotamian Campaign', in H. Cecil and P. H. Liddle (eds.), *Facing Armageddon: The First World War Experienced* (London, 1996), pp. 475-489.

with the Indian soldiers had a great effect on an individual's perception of the Indian soldiers. I will also contribute to our understanding of how the Indian soldiers related to the Empire, and how deeply this relationship was felt. Mason, VanKoski and Cohen have argued that Empire, honour and loyalty mostly motivated the Indians.<sup>33</sup> Omissi and Barua have argued that in addition, they were motivated by financial incentives.<sup>34</sup> This study will contribute to this debate, through its use of new primary sources and its focus on WWI testing of these ideals.

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<sup>33</sup> Mason, *Honour*; VanKoski, 'Punjabi Soldiers', pp. 44-63 and Cohen, *Indian Army*.

<sup>34</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 1-46 and Barua, *Gentlemen of the Raj*, pp. 1-15.

## Chapter One: British Commanders

This chapter will focus on the perceptions of Indian soldiers held by British commanders. To study this effectively, it will be necessary to discuss the historiography of cultural relations within the Raj and military histories of the Indian Army. The primary sources in this chapter are published memoirs by British commanders of the Indian Army in WWI. As commanders in the Indian Army, they had close first hand experience of India and its people over a long period of time, but were also instrumental in the management of the Raj.

The first two chapters will argue that previous historians have not discussed combat experience of the British officers and that this has left significant gaps in our understanding of the Indian Army in WWI. The approach taken by scholars of the Indian Army has been to focus on sources from high-level commanding officers and politicians in the Raj. The perceptions and experiences of all these officers will be compared, contrasted and analysed.

Cohen has argued that martial races were 'less a theory than a catch-all phrase' which was used to justify different roles for Indian groups through stereotypes.<sup>35</sup> His discussion of race-relations is based largely on the structure of the Indian Army and the people behind it, such as Curzon, Kitchener and Willcox. Historians of the Indian Army commonly use these sources.<sup>36</sup> The historiography can be broken down into certain identifiable aspects of broader British perceptions of the Indian Army: Indian notions of honour or *izzat*; the role of the Indians in the army; Indian bravery and martial races. As many scholars have viewed racism as fundamental to British perceptions of the Indians, this discussion will also focus on the actual prevalence and nature of racism in the Indian Army.

Greenhut discussed Indianization and the Indian role in WWI in a series of brief articles in the 1980s. He concluded that the British officers were 'unashamedly racist' – they believed that they were inherently superior to the Indian soldiers and

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<sup>35</sup> Cohen, *Indian Army*, p. 45.

<sup>36</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 153-191; Greenhut, 'The Imperial Reserve'. Omissi and Greenhut use the same sources, even the same quotes.

while they may have admired or loved their soldiers, they never forgot their perception of themselves as superior.<sup>37</sup> Greenhut argues that this was based in British Christian morality, which demanded they respect their 'inferiors', but only as a father may treat a backward child.<sup>38</sup> Elsewhere, Greenhut argues that Social Darwinism and racism provided a comforting justification for Empire, and were fundamental in the mindset of the British officers.<sup>39</sup> The issue of honour is a major part of the arguments of Greenhut and others. Mason discusses the importance of honour and loyalty arguing that in the Indian Army disloyalty was treason, with total obedience required.<sup>40</sup> The Indian soldiers had to show great loyalty before their officers would show them some level of respect or conceived of them as heroic.<sup>41</sup>

Barua's work is useful in understanding these subjects from a British perspective.<sup>42</sup> Barua places his study in a wider context of British Imperial culture.<sup>43</sup> He is aware of social trends in Britain, as his article *Inventing Race* suggests.<sup>44</sup> In this article, he outlines the way in which the British 'discovered' martial races, based on many faulty assumptions and pseudo-scientific examinations of ethnic groups. Loyalty was the first thing that was looked for.<sup>45</sup> Previously, it had been argued that the theory of martial races was used to divide and rule in India.<sup>46</sup> Barua argues that the classification of races was used by the British to help understand and rule in India, and that they genuinely believed that certain ethnic groups were more suited to military life than others. *Gentlemen of the Raj* has been criticised as an apology for British policies.<sup>47</sup> The work perhaps focuses on the British perspective, but as a study of the Indian Army it produces a better cultural study than military-focused historians

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<sup>37</sup> Greenhut, 'Sahib and Sepoy', p. 16.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>40</sup> Mason, *Honour*, p. 406.

<sup>41</sup> Cohen, *The Indian Army* and Mason, *Honour*. Cohen, in another history of the Indian army, came to similar conclusions.

<sup>42</sup> For Barua's work see: Barua, *Gentlemen of the Raj* and P. P. Barua, 'Inventing Race: The British and India's Martial Races', *The Historian*, 58, 1 (1995), pp. 107-116.

<sup>43</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*; Cohen, *The Indian Army*; Sharpe, *Indianisation* and W. Gutteridge 'The Indianisation of the Indian Army 1918-45' *Race*, 4, 63 (1963), pp. 39-48.

<sup>44</sup> Barua, 'Inventing Race', pp. 107-116.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* This can be seen in the histories of the Indian Army by Cohen and Mason. See Cohen, *The Indian Army*, pp. 32-57 and Mason, *Honour*, pp. 341-361.

<sup>47</sup> A. Deshpande, 'Gentlemen of the Raj: The Indian Army Officer Corps, 1817-1949 by Pradeep P. Barua.', *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 32, 3 (2004), pp. 152-154.

Mason and Cohen. This study can contribute to this debate by showing the nature of British perceptions of race, through high-level sources such as commanders, as well as previously unused sources from junior officers.

To place the study of the Indian Army in historical context I would like to discuss how the recruitment strategy of martial races was influenced by British Imperial ideology. Metcalf and Metcalf argue that in the 1870s British concepts of enlightenment and progress gave way to authoritarian rule by the perceived superior race.<sup>48</sup> The Indian Rebellion in 1857 was important in the development of the martial races theory.<sup>49</sup> The event damaged the romantic notions of empire and led to security-conscious policies, which reinforced racism in late-Victorian England.<sup>50</sup> Previously, the Raj had been justified though focusing on the similarities of the British and the Indians. After the Indian Rebellion, a pessimistic stance replaced Victorian romanticism, leading the British to focus on the differences. Metcalf argues 'difference' then became the main justification for the Raj.<sup>51</sup> The cause of the rebellion was seen to be certain ethnic groups in the army: Gurkhas, Sikhs and Rajputs remained loyal and accepted British supremacy, whereas Bengalis rebelled.<sup>52</sup> The British began to look upon the former groups as having 'innate' loyalty.<sup>53</sup>

Barua argues that the British justified their rule through 'superiority'. They believed themselves to be the superior race, and that they could therefore improve the lives of the inferior race. Colonial ethnographers had a considerable effect on shaping British attitudes.<sup>54</sup> Scientific Racism is the use of scientific (or pseudo-scientific)

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<sup>48</sup> B. D. Metcalf and T. R. Metcalf, *A Concise History of India* (Cambridge, 2002), pp. 91-93.

<sup>49</sup> For a detailed discussion on the events of the Indian Rebellion, see; S. David, *The Indian Mutiny* (London, 2004). On older approaches to the event, see, for example; R. Collier, *The Great Indian Mutiny* (New York, 1964) and S. B. Chaudhuri *Theories of the Indian Mutiny (1857-9): A study of the views of the of an Eminent Historian on the Subject* (Calcutta, 1965). For an excellent discussion of how the 'mutiny' has been treated by historians, and how it affected British racial attitudes, see Metcalf and Metcalf, *History of India*, pp. 91-122. This subject is also covered by Mason, when discussing changes after the 'mutiny', Mason, *Honour*, pp. 313-317.

<sup>50</sup> For discussions on how the Rebellion affected the British see; Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*. For a study of the Indian Rebellion in English literature G. Chakravarty, *The Indian Mutiny and the British Imagination* (Cambridge, 2005). See also, Judd, *Lion and the Tiger*, pp. 70-90.

<sup>51</sup> Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*.

<sup>52</sup> Barua, *Inventing Race*, pp. 107-116.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*. An example of this work is Risley's *The People of India* which was considered very important when published. See H. H. Risley *The People of India* (Delhi, 1908). The analysis in this book is divided into 'physical types', 'social types' and discussions of caste.

studies to promote racial differences. Such studies have often been used to underpin racist social policies.<sup>55</sup> Recently, Inden has mocked the objective and scientific merit of British colonial ethnographers' studies.<sup>56</sup> Still, they can tell us a lot about how the British saw Indian society and how it was classified, though extremely poor as anthropological studies by today's standards.<sup>57</sup>

Part of this classification was the search for 'martial races'. The British thought that the 'martial' groups understood the meaning of honour and duty, summed up in the term '*izzat*'.<sup>58</sup> *Izzat* was intended to be a major guiding force for the Indian Army. Omissi wrote that it was a standard to which the Indians aspired. Military honour can take many forms, and is difficult to define. *Izzat* can be translated as 'honour' 'self-respect' or 'prestige'.<sup>59</sup> Of course, 'honour' is not unique to the Indian Army, though the British believed *izzat* to be distinctly Indian.<sup>60</sup> Robinson discusses honour in the military very broadly. He gives four virtues tied with military honour: prowess: courage: loyalty and truthfulness.<sup>61</sup> In the Indian Army, *izzat* took the form of an informal but widely understood code of conduct. It was not written down or clearly defined, meaning it meant different things to different people. Indian soldiers write of *izzat* as something eternal that would stay with them long after their deaths. It reflected on more than just individuals. In many cases it was written about as reflecting on family, military unit, caste, or the whole of India. Some Indians wrote

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<sup>55</sup> D. M. Rutledge, 'Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism and the Metaphysics of Race', *Journal of Negro Education*, 64, 3 (1995), pp. 243-252. For further information, see: G. C. Kinloch, *The Dynamics of Race Relations: A Sociological Analysis* (New York, 1974); J. M. Jones, *Prejudice and Racism* (Reading, 1972); C. Guillaumin, *Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology* (London, 1995) and M. Banton, *Racial Theories* (Cambridge, 1987).

<sup>56</sup> R. Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990), p. 58.

<sup>57</sup> M. Waligora, 'What Is Your "Caste"? The Classification of Indian Society as Part of the British Civilizing Mission' in Fischer-Tiné and Mann, *Colonialism as Civilizing Mission*, pp. 141-165.

<sup>58</sup> *Izzat* is an Indian term similar in meaning to 'honour'. The importance of honour in Indian society has been mentioned noted by many scholars, and linked to the involvement of the British and the Independence movement. For example, it has been linked to 'honour killings' of women: see Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*; U. Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence - Women's Voices from the Partition of India* (Durham, 2000) and R. Menon and K. Bhasin, *Borders & Boundaries: Women in India's Partition* (New Brunswick, 1998). For further discussion of honour as fundamental in Indian society, see V. Das, 'National Honour and Practical Kinship,' in V. Das (ed.), *Critical Events* (Delhi, 1995), pp. 55-83 and P. Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, 1993).

<sup>59</sup> O. K. Takhar, *Sikh Identity, an Exploration of Groups among Sikhs* (London, 2005), p. 186.

<sup>60</sup> For an example of this belief, see Willcox, *With the Indians*, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> P. Robinson, *Military Honour and the Conduct of War: From Ancient Greece to Iraq* (Abingdon, 2006), pp. 1-8

of *izzat* as something that would stay with them after death, into the afterlife.<sup>62</sup> In many ways, *izzat* appears no different to other forms of honour. As a code it asks for loyalty, gallantry, honest, and for soldiers do their duty. The main difference between *izzat* and British honour is that it is emphasised as more explicitly eternal, important in shaping a soldiers afterlife and reflects further than on an individual and their immediate family. Importantly, it was thought by colonial ethnographers that 'honour' was more powerful for Indian soldiers than for British ones.<sup>63</sup> This is strong example of Metcalf's concept of difference, as the British and Indian conceptions of honour are quite similar, yet the British emphasised the differences between the two. Omissi argues that the British were aware of the power of *izzat* and so created more awards and decorations so as to inspire the Indians and to bind them in loyalty.<sup>64</sup> This was aimed at tying *izzat* to the British Empire, which was quite successful, as many soldiers were devoted to duty to the British Empire.<sup>65</sup>

British conceptions of *izzat* were linked to martial races. To understand the concept of martial races we should consider its opposite: non-martial races. Particularly following the Indian Rebellion, the Bengalis were not considered martial, because they did not have a strong conception of duty. This was essentially because they were instigators of the Rebellion. They were thought of as lacking *izzat*, so recruitment focused on those who possessed it.<sup>66</sup> Francis Yeats-Brown wrote in his classic interpretation of martial races, *Martial India*, that the Sikh had five distinguishing marks.<sup>67</sup> These included uncut hair and a steel or iron bracelet to remind him of his martial heritage. Yeats believed that the Sikhs became martial because they had been hardened by persecution under the Mughul Emperors.<sup>68</sup> He also wrote that the Sikhs and Gurkhas were the only races he had encountered that 'really liked fighting'.<sup>69</sup> Visual, mental and historical factors defined martial races. It was thought that the Sikhs looked, thought and fought in very specific ways. This

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<sup>62</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 76-84. Takhar, *Sikh Identity*, p. 186..

<sup>63</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 76-84 The extent to which the Indians believed in *izzat* will be discussed further in Chapter Three.

<sup>64</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 76-84.

<sup>65</sup> VanKoski, 'Punjabi Soldiers'. The strength of this argument will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> F. Yeats-Brown, *Martial India* (London, 1945), p. 30

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.



thesis will discuss the extent to which the British officers saw the Indian soldiers within such narrow frameworks.

To understand British conceptions of Indian bravery, we can refer to the stereotype Greenhut discussed: that the Indians were childlike, and needed strong British guidance.<sup>70</sup> The British conception of Indian heroism was that they were courageous, but they did not temper this with reason. Omissi pointed out that this reputation for thickheadedness had some basis in fact, because the Indian soldiers were recruited from the least literate sections of the population.<sup>71</sup> In histories of the Indian Army, British perceptions of the temperament of the Indian soldiers are often examined using sources written by generals and politicians, particularly in discussions of Indianization. Omissi, Sharpe, Cohen and Mason use these sources as evidence for all British perspectives of the Indian Army.<sup>72</sup> According to these historians, all British officers were particularly condescending, and did not believe it was the role of the Indians to lead.

We should bear in mind when analysing language that there are significant differences between a military and a civilian setting. All armies have a culture of hierarchy.<sup>73</sup> This is aimed at defining clear command structures, but it also changes personal relationships and perceptions within the army. Holding a position of leadership forces a person to see units as broad groups of people, rather than individuals.<sup>74</sup> Goddard, a former Indian Army officer turned historian, makes this point when discussing ethnic groups within the Indian Army.<sup>75</sup> This suggests that the commanders in the Indian Army used the martial races discourse partly because of their position. The use of such generalisations is not enough to constitute racism; an attitude of superiority must be based on racial characteristics to be considered racist.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Greenhut, 'Sahib and Sepoy', p. 15.

<sup>71</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, p. 27.

<sup>72</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, Sharpe 'Indianisation', Mason, *Honour*, and Cohen, *Indian Army*. This perspective will be discussed further in Chapter Two.

<sup>73</sup> M. Janowitz and W. R. Little, *Sociology and the Military Establishment* (California, 1974), pp. 43-65.

<sup>74</sup> G. Henderson, 'Leadership', in, G. Henderson (ed.), *Human Relations in the Military – Problems and Programs* (Chicago, 1975) pp. 1-18; G. Henderson, 'Preface', in, Henderson (ed.), *Human Relations in the Military*, pp. vii-vii.

<sup>75</sup> E. Goddard, 'The Indian Army – Company and Raj', *Asian Affairs*, 63, 3 (1976), p. 264.

<sup>76</sup> Henderson, 'Race Relations', pp. 53-55.

Racism, honour and martial races are the key themes of historiography of the Indian Army. How commonly held, though were British perceptions of Indian soldiers, outlined by Greenhut and Omissi? How did WWI affect these conceptions? These issues will now be addressed through thorough examination of memoirs of diaries of British officers.

### ***With The Indians in France* by General James Willcox**

General Sir James Willcox was born in 1857, and joined the Leinster regiment in 1878. He took full command of an operation for the first time in 1899.<sup>77</sup> WWI was his first role with the Indian Army, though he had previously spent four years in India.<sup>78</sup> He commanded Indian Army WWI operations on the Western Front from 1914-1915.<sup>79</sup> His introductory chapter gives insight into his opinions, as it is largely about the nature and structure of the Indian Army.<sup>80</sup> This is not an unused primary source; it is one of the most frequently cited works in histories of the Indian Army and their role on the Western Front. It is because of this heavy use, though, that it is necessary to have a thorough understanding of it in order to understand the conclusions made by previous historians.

Willcox notes the ‘shortcomings’ of the Indian army and states that the British officers overcame them.<sup>81</sup> Following this, he discusses the Indian officers, seeing them as:

men who had earned their commissions by brave and loyal service, of fighting stock, with martial traditions, ready to give their lives for their King Emperor, proud of the profession of arms; they formed the essential link between the British officers and men.<sup>82</sup>

This shows his beliefs immediately, commenting on ‘fighting stock’ and ‘martial traditions’. His praise is tempered by the belief that they could not replace the British

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<sup>77</sup> Mereweather and Smith, *Indian Corps in France*, pp. 17-18.

<sup>78</sup> Willcox, *With the Indians*, p. 1.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1-18.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.5-7.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

officer in the field – not because they lack ‘bravery and self-sacrifice’, but because ‘training and temperament at present stand in [their] way’.<sup>83</sup> His last words in this book are ‘you can NEVER replace the British officer in the Indian Army’.<sup>84</sup> He is commenting on the prospect of Indianization. To be fair to Willcox, he also argues that Indian officers were not paid enough, and that they should have been given rank equal to that of the British officers.<sup>85</sup> Given the other evidence for his opinions, this may be one small shade of grey in a book that otherwise presents only black and white.

Willcox’s view of the Indian soldiers’ motivation further confirms his opinions as fitting with the discourse of honour or *izzat*. He states that: ‘*izzat* is a thing little understood by any but Indians, but it is a great driving force; it raises men in the estimation of their fellows, whilst the loss of it debases them.’<sup>86</sup> This ties into martial racism, which saw *izzat* as something particular to the martial races of India. *Izzat* was used by the British with the lure of medals and awards.<sup>87</sup> Whether or not this was truly important to the Indian soldier will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three, but clearly Willcox thought it was of great importance.

Willcox gives a very good example of how the idea of martial races could affect a British officer’s perception of the Indian soldiers. He wrote that he had:

soldiered with Rajputs and Jats, Pathans, Sikhs, Gurkhas, Punjabi Mahomedans, Madras Sappers and Miners, Dogras, Garhwalis and other races. Each has its characteristics, and these must be recognised by any one entrusted with the command of Indian troops.<sup>88</sup>

This approach is characteristic of the book, for Willcox looks at all the ‘fighting races’ and discusses how well they acquitted themselves in the war. He lists them all as having very particular qualities, which affected their performance in the trenches. For example, he wrote that the Dogras: ‘are quiet, steady, clean soldiers’; the Pathans ‘have quicker wits than the other races’ and the Sikhs are ‘fine manly soldier[s]’, but

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<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 344. Author’s capitalization, not mine.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> Omissi *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 78-80.

<sup>88</sup> Willcox, *Indians in France*, p. 7.

should not be spoiled or pampered.<sup>89</sup> Henderson wrote on the topic of leadership in the context of an army, and argued that an effective leader must understand the characteristics of the group that he leads.<sup>90</sup> We can extend this to the position of Willcox, who was in charge of several different groups, which were classifiable in British racial ideology as Jats, Pathans, etc. While this may help to explain his explicit focus on grouping soldiers, he assigns particular qualities across broad 'racial' groups. While his leadership position can help to show why the concept of martial races resonates so strongly with Willcox, this still shows the very strong influence of racial notions on his perceptions of the Indian soldiers.

The evidence seems to suggest that Willcox is trying to present a very positive view of all involved with the Indian army, but within strict boundaries of what he saw to be the roles of people of different ranks and backgrounds. This may not be at all unusual from a general in any army, but in this case, the structure contains inherent racial prejudice. He did not see Indian soldiers as capable of higher thought or advancement through the ranks. This view fits very comfortably within the scholarship discussed above which focuses on racism. Of course, this work is cited frequently in studies of the Indian Army. For example, Omissi and Greenhut both quote Willcox discussing the Indianization process:<sup>91</sup> 'I firmly believe the British officers ... will unanimously agree with me'.<sup>92</sup> And here, I believe, lies the difficulty: the opinions of the highest-ranking officers are widely accepted as representative of the British officers as whole. Yet these officers were the ones with the most limited contact with the Indian soldiers. They view the Indians from the greatest distance, and, detached by their position, fail to see the details. This issue will be covered in more depth in Chapter Two, but for now, I will focus on what other commanding officers, in positions similar to Willcox, thought of their Indian charges.

***On Two Fronts: Being the Adventures of an Indian Mule Corps in France and Gallipoli* by Major Herbert Alexander.**

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57. For further discussion of the different 'types' of soldiers in the Indian Army, see D. Pal, *Traditions of the Indian Army* (Delhi, 1961), pp. 3-75.

<sup>90</sup> Henderson, 'Leadership', p. 9. See also Henderson, 'Preface', vii-vii Janowitz and Little, *The Military Establishment*, pp. 43-65; S. Andreski, *Military Organization and Society* (London, 1968); J. van Doorn, *The Soldier and Social Change* (California, 1975).

<sup>91</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, p. 161. Greenhut, 'The Imperial Reserve', p. 72.

<sup>92</sup> Willcox, *With The Indians*, p. 6.

Major H. M. Alexander was with the 9th Mule Corps of the Indian Army in France and Gallipoli in WWI. He was the sole British officer in command of his company of 500 men and 768 mules.<sup>93</sup> The job of this Corps was to bring supplies to men at the front. The work was written two years after the events it recounts and written largely from memory, though it does contain factual information and dates and is based on diary writings to some extent.<sup>94</sup>

Initially his focus is not the Indian troops, indeed he appears more interested in the qualities of his horse, Mahdi.<sup>95</sup> He does not have a great deal to say about the men, though snippets do come through. We can learn something from his lack of comments on the Indian soldiers. That he makes few mentions of the Indian rank-and-file suggests that they were not of great importance to him. When they are mentioned, it is usually when something heroic, funny or entertaining had occurred. One event of heroism stuck in his mind. He describes two Indians being captured by the Germans, leaving their mules behind by a haystack.

After a time, their captors being fully occupied with their own affairs, the two Indians managed to slip away. They did not make straight for our lines. Not a bit of it. They sought and found the haystack, recovered their mules, reloaded them with the ammunition-boxes and strolled in.<sup>96</sup>

His conception of heroism is deeply racialised. A telling comment comes when discussing the gallantry of Captain Singh, an army doctor. '(Singh) was given one of the first Military Crosses but did not live to wear it, being killed in action shortly afterwards. Singh was educated in England, and was as white a man as ever lived.'<sup>97</sup>

This being said, Alexander does not use the language of martial races very frequently. Unlike Willcox, he does not give descriptions of different ethnic groups listing their qualities as soldiers.<sup>98</sup> He does use these terms, but in a different way. He

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<sup>93</sup> H. M. Alexander, *On Two Fronts - Being the Adventures of an Indian Mule Corps in France and Gallipoli* (London, 1917), p. 79.

<sup>94</sup> Alexander, *On Two Fronts*, Foreword (no page numbers given).

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, *Passim*. See Willcox, *With the Indians*, pp. 56-57.

uses them as descriptive terms, one suspects perhaps because these were the only terms available to differentiate between different ethnic groups. These terms were a part of British discourse of the time, and the use of them does not necessarily imply racist attitudes.

To say that Captain Singh 'was as white a man who ever lived' is an interesting conception of bravery. This suggests that the highest compliment that can be paid to an Indian is to call him 'white'. This must be taken in context: he was an educated man, and a doctor. In this case, he was not saying that Singh was 'white' in colour, but rather 'white' meaning 'honourable' and 'square-dealing', as was common slang at the time.<sup>99</sup> In this case, calling an Indian white does not refer to his brave acts, but more his upbringing and education. That this should be summed up by the word 'white' shows Alexander thought that such qualities were generally European. Notions of heroism are important in understanding this. Time and again, British officers refer to the reckless bravery of the Indians. The British conceive the acts of heroism performed by Indian soldiers differently from their own. Dawson studied this notion of idealised masculinity and heroism in the British Empire. By looking at biographies, news reports and novels he found that notions of masculinity were important to British national imaginings.<sup>100</sup> This notion was referred to as 'sterling qualities' by Margaret Thatcher after the Falklands war.<sup>101</sup> The British self-conception of their own bravery prevalent at the time of the Empire and WWI (from which Thatcher's remark drew) was based on a stoic, hardy masculinity. When Alexander calls Singh 'white' he is referring to a different kind of heroism that he saw in the actions of the Indian rank and file soldiers who escaped the German army. It was indeed brave to return to the mules instead of going straight for the trenches, but it was reckless. He says they 'strolled' in. This suggests that he believed them to be relaxed and almost unthinking about their actions. The British conception of Indian bravery in this case is that when they were brave, they were in a sense foolish or

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<sup>99</sup> On this slang, see the Oxford English Dictionary:  
[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50284786?query\\_type=word&queryword=white&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&result\\_place=4](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50284786?query_type=word&queryword=white&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=4): date accessed Friday, 3 October 2008.

<sup>100</sup> G. Dawson, *British Adventure, Empire and the Imagining of Masculinities* (London, 2004), pp. 259-293.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

irrational, as if they did not quite understand what they had done, or that they had been lucky.

Further statements about the Indians when at Gallipoli show that Alexander regarded the Indians as irrational and impulsive. He describes being asked to settle a bet between two Indians on what was French for 'milk', *lait*, or *du lait*. He states that 'a lot of money was at stake, for an Indian is always ready to back his opinion to the extent of a month's pay'.<sup>102</sup> Alexander saw this as reckless gambling, over a pointless argument (indeed, both sides of this argument are correct, as Alexander informed them). In this case, placing large sums of money on such a debate, to see these actions as irrational and impulsive, and to use such language to describe it is quite reasonable. However, he writes of *this* argument as irrational, but also he states that *an Indian* is always ready to place large sums of money on his opinion. This is strong evidence to suggest that Alexander saw this fight over the French term for milk, and the large wager over it, as typically 'Indian'.

His closing statements are very complimentary to the Indians. He writes that: 'a more hardworking, uncomplaining, gallant lot of soldiers than the mule-drivers... are not to be found in the armies of the British Empire'.<sup>103</sup> This is Alexander's final praise of his unit. Hardworking, uncomplaining and gallant - exactly what do these words imply? That these soldiers should be described as 'uncomplaining' suggests something more of the expected role of the Indian soldier. They should not be heard from, they should just follow orders. This is not unsurprising in a military setting, but that it should be mentioned among the finest characteristics of a military unit could be considered condescending in its praise. Bearing this in mind, Alexander clearly had very specific ideas of the role of the Indians – they should work hard and not ask questions. In the context of his other comments on Indian heroism, it is clear that he believes Indian soldiers had a very specific and limited role as followers in the Indian Army.

Clearly, honour, superiority and racial ideology were important to the people in command of the Indian Army in WWI. As these accounts were written after the

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<sup>102</sup> Alexander, *On Two Fronts*, p. 197.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 248

events of the war it is difficult to judge any changes in their opinions during the course of the war. Still, as they write unsympathetically and in the discourse of martial races there does not appear to have been any softening of their approach to the Indian soldiers. Alexander's perception of Indian heroism is particularly telling – an irrational and reckless brand of bravery. However, there are differences in the ways in which the two authors discuss the Indians' 'martial heritage'. Alexander does not give descriptions of different martial races as having particular innate qualities, whereas Willcox makes a point of listing them all and identifying specific characteristics. When Alexander uses these terms, he does so as descriptions of separate units rather than as racial fighting characteristics. This is enough to suggest that the racial attitudes of the British varied amongst people holding high ranks in the Indian Army. Nevertheless, they both appear to have similar perceptions of Indian heroism and honour. They have similar expectations about the Indians' role in the army - they are not allowed to lead because they are irrational and backward.

Why did the perceptions of the commanders remain untouched by their experience of WWI? The answer lies largely in the nature of their position and their role in the army hierarchy. Their role as commanders encouraged them to see the men that they commanded both Indian and English as 'other'. To command men it is necessary to disengage from them as individuals. This detachment allowed them to send the men into danger without feeling a shared personal threat. They also saw the Indians as 'warlike' members of martial races. This encouraged them in their belief that they could use these men to help win the war. Commanders were concerned with a wider range of logistical problems, such as matters of strategy, supply of equipment, winning battles, and keeping the war effort going. The Indian soldiers were simply one of the many problems they had to manage, a small aspect of a broad and complicated picture. Their perceptions did not change, because they were not in close proximity with the Indian soldiers: they were not fighting side by side in the trenches. Their detachment made it easier to continue to see the soldiers as inferior. Furthermore, a commander can more easily send soldiers into battle if they believe the soldier is genuine fighter, from a martial race. The commanders did not want to have their beliefs challenged, and they were not presented with any strong reason to do so. Consequently, their perceptions remained largely unchanged.



## Chapter Two: British Junior Officers

So far, British perceptions of the Indian soldiers within the Army fit relatively comfortably within the discourse of racial superiority, racial differences, honour and loyalty. However, the analysis of secondary sources presented in Chapter One shows that the previous historians focused their discussion on generals and politicians who were detached from the Indian soldiers. As a result, the issue of combat experience changing British perceptions and identities has not yet been addressed. The inadequacies of previous works on the question of British officers' opinions of Indian soldiers are not entirely surprising. Sources from the commanding officers are relevant and show a great deal about how important racial attitudes were to the British government and those in command of the Indian Army, but they cannot be taken as representative of other people. This chapter will focus on the officers with direct WWI combat experience alongside the Indian soldiers. They shared a similar position with Indian officers, though always outranked them, and worked closely with rank-and-file Indian soldiers.<sup>104</sup>

### The Diary of Captain Roly Grimshaw

Roly Grimshaw was born in Dublin in 1879. He joined the Royal Irish regiment in 1899, and two years later was transferred to the 34<sup>th</sup> Poona Horse. Between this transfer and the outbreak of war, he spent much time in India.<sup>105</sup> His diary is an excellent historical source. He writes that the final version of his diary is the same as the original, with the exception of purely private matters. He began to write with the outbreak of war, and was then severely wounded in 1915.<sup>106</sup>

Grimshaw begins his diary discussing the Indian soldiers' decision to fight. He was impressed by their willingness to fight for a cause that would have been obscure to them. He chooses interesting language from the regimental history to

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<sup>104</sup> The mechanics of the Indian Army at this time have been covered thoroughly by historical studies of the Indian army, and indeed the writing of Willcox, Mereweather and Smith at the time. However, for a simple overview, see Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, pp. 1-22.

<sup>105</sup> J. Wakefield and J. M. Weippert, 'Introduction' in J. Wakefield and J. M. Weippert, *Indian Cavalry Officer – the Diary of Captain Roly Grimshaw* (Kent, 1986), pp. 9-12.

<sup>106</sup> R. R. W. Grimshaw, *The Diary of Captain Roly Grimshaw* (Kent, 1986), p. 13.

describe this phenomenon, which mentions the 'innate loyalty' of Indian soldiers.<sup>107</sup> In the period from 13 August 1914 to 12 September, he was *en route* to meet the Indians in Egypt, and did not encounter them. However, he makes remarks such as 'Britain's entry into the war to fulfil her promise to defend a small nation made an instant appeal to the best instincts of the Indian people'.<sup>108</sup> His reference to innate loyalty shows a particular belief in racial qualities of the Indian soldiers.

It was not until September 16 that he begun to make more detailed mentions of the Indian units he encountered. On this day, he described the march past of the Indian troops, past the local 'riff-raff'. He wrote:

I was utterly disgusted at the entire display. The officers badly mounted, untidy, and sitting their horses like jellyfish. The men out of step, with broken sections, ragged ranks and talking and looking about them as if on a Mohurru festival ... it looked like a retreat from Moscow.<sup>109</sup>

Grimshaw was clearly very disappointed by this display, but racial sentiments are not explicitly expressed. British soldiers showing a lack of discipline in their marches would have similarly offended him. However, it does show his belief in military discipline, which he saw the Indians as lacking at this time. In the following weeks, he made very little mention of the Indian soldiers. In this period he writes mostly on his day-to-day activities and awaiting more news from the war.<sup>110</sup>

It is not until October 30<sup>th</sup> that we see any signs of a different attitude towards the Indians. He wrote: 'I nearly had a row with the RAMC major in charge, as he wanted to turn my Indian officers out of a first class carriage for his warrant officers. Typical of the attitude towards Indians'.<sup>111</sup> This quote is the first sign that Grimshaw's opinions of the Indian soldiers are multi-dimensional and, considering what he wrote above, beginning to change. He was willing to 'row' with a superior officer (a Major), over the treatment of Indian officers. He does not see the British officers as being more deserving of a first class carriage than Indian officers. This

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21. Entry for Wednesday 16 September, 1914.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22-27, covers entries from Wednesday 23 September to the 29 October, 1914.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 28-29. Entry for the 30 October.

being said, his comments at the beginning of combat in the 1<sup>st</sup> Ypres again reinforce other stereotypes discussed above. When digging trenches at night he wrote that ‘I knew that I could depend on the Jodhpurs for reckless bravery, I was apprehensive of them giving us away at such, for them, an unusual occupation of digging trenches in the dark’.<sup>112</sup> This vision of ‘reckless bravery’ fits comfortably with the stereotypes discussed in Chapter One.

The horror of WW1 changes his writing style significantly in late November 1914, when he describes in more detail finding the body of a soldier he knew who had been trampled into the mud by at least two-hundred men previously.

There he was almost submerged in mud and slush... I thought of that youth in his home in the hills in India, probably the pride of his parents, and then to see him thus trampled into the mud like another piece of mud, of no more account than a fragment of offal... poor Ashraf Khan, an only son, and his mother a widow. He lived for 40 minutes.<sup>113</sup>

He is using sentimental language to describe the Indians. His entries from this point onward are far longer than they were previously. He begins to refer to the Indian soldiers by name, whereas they were previously identified by rank, caste or religious background: ‘the subaltern sapper’ for example. He is still aware of differences though, which is clear in his description of the wounded: ‘Sikhs with their hair all down and looking more wild and weird than I have ever seen them; Pathans more dirty and untidy than usual’.<sup>114</sup> As discussed above, a Sikh’s hair was a common way of identifying the Sikh ‘race’.<sup>115</sup> Pathans being more dirty ‘than usual’ is another example of seeing specific characteristics in Indian ethnic groups. This shows that despite the changes in his writing, and his disillusionment with the war, Grimshaw still identifies with the concept of martial races.

On the day before he was injured, Grimshaw wrote this passage on WW1, which tells us much about the effect of his experiences on his mindset, particularly bearing in mind his more condescending comments above:

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<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34. Entry for 13 November.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 38-39. Entry for 24 November.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* p. 54. Entry for Sunday 20 December, pp. 53-58.

<sup>115</sup> This is discussed in Chapter One of this study. See Yeats-Brown, *Martial India*, pp. 30-31.

The crashing of the enemy's howitzer shells over the town and the incessant roar of battle ahead all brought the hideous reality of war home to me. I asked myself, is that what civilisation means? If so, what a mockery it all is. I looked at our men's faces to see if I could penetrate their thoughts, but they wore one dead-level mask – abandoned indifference.<sup>116</sup>

Grimshaw had not been in the trenches long, but his experiences had created disillusionment with WWI. He clearly has a different experience of WWI from the commanding officers discussed: a far greater personal experience of combat. This has had a profound impact on his perceptions of the Indian soldiers. Whereas the British commanders would see anything less than complete honour and bravery as a failure, Grimshaw sees 'abandoned indifference' without complaint. He is also beginning to doubt 'civilisation', which could imply doubts of British and European superiority. In this case, the other officers attempted to help them along, no longer expecting enthusiasm from their charges. This suggests that Grimshaw was not alone in his transition towards a more sympathetic and human approach to Indian soldiers.

Grimshaw's perceptions are far more complex than those found in the previous historiography. Disillusionment with WWI has changed the language and perceptions of Grimshaw. We can see clearly that Grimshaw held an underlying belief in Empire, but it was not *all* he believed in. This did not cloud his perceptions in a way that we might have expected on the basis of previous historiography. The experience of trench warfare appears to have softened Grimshaw's perceptions of the Indian soldiers. We should also keep his remarks in context: he was an officer in an army. This is a highly structured environment in which he had risen to a privileged rank. It would be unusual if he did not write on occasion with a superior tone. One would expect the same from any officer, regardless of the troops he was commanding. He holds a far more complex understanding of the Indian soldiers than the commanding officers discussed in Chapter One. His perceptions of them were far more sympathetic, and grew more sympathetic as the war continued and as their shared experiences of war united them.

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<sup>116</sup> Grimshaw, *Diary of Roly Grimshaw*, p. 54. See entry for Sunday 20 December, 1914, pp. 53-58.

### ***Sam's Soldiering* By George 'Sam' Raschen**

The second primary source in this chapter is *Sam's Soldiering* by George Raschen. Raschen fought with the Indian Army during WW1, briefly in France and then spending most his time in Mesopotamia.<sup>117</sup> He started his career in India in 1913, but left his job at the beginning of WW1 to join the Army.<sup>118</sup> He was born in 1889, and was thus only young when he commenced his work as an officer in the Indian army. His experience of India before the war was very short.<sup>119</sup> He served as an 'Emergency Commissioned Officer' (ECO) – the name given to new officers who were called in to replace members of the regular officer corps, which had been decimated during WW1.<sup>120</sup> His work on WW1 is part of a larger autobiography, *Sam's India*, which was written after WWII. George's son Daniel Raschen has edited the work for publishing.<sup>121</sup>

The account begins with his decision to join the Indian Army. Upon his first meeting of the Indian soldiers he remarks that he had mistakenly expected that the standards of 'smartness' for the Indian soldiers would be lower than that of the British.<sup>122</sup> He is referring here to the mounting of the quarter guard, so 'smartness' refers not to intelligence but to the level of discipline and order required in such a manoeuvre. This shows his initial expectations were very low. He is assigned to the 21<sup>st</sup> Punjabi regiment, which he describes through the discourse of martial races. For example, he describes the Dogras as 'those little quiet aristocratic chaps who gave such false impressions of mildness'.<sup>123</sup> We should note that this is similar to Willcox's description of the Dogras, though written in far more casual tone.<sup>124</sup> When discussing all of the 'fighting races' of India he says that the one thing that was abhorred most was weakness.<sup>125</sup> These are still his early thoughts and impressions of

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<sup>117</sup> Not a great deal has been written on the Mesopotamian campaign in WW1. For further information see Barker, *The Neglected War*; R. Willcox, *Battles on the Tigris*; Woodward, *Forgotten soldiers of the First World War*.

<sup>118</sup> G. Raschen, *Sam's Soldering* (Swindon, 2000), pp. 37-39.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 37.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42.

<sup>124</sup> See Willcox, *With the Indians*, p. 7.

<sup>125</sup> Raschen, *Sam's Soldiering*, p. 42.

India, but certainly he perceives the Indians in the army within the discourse of martial India.

When in France, he discusses the position of an ECO and being asked to command a different group of Indian soldiers from the ones he was shipped out with. He states that:

The trust and confidence of Indian troops stemmed from their own officers, built up by personal contact and mutual understandings: to expect them to show up as well under a newcomer, however good, was like expecting a good gundog to work immediately for a stranger.<sup>126</sup>

This suggests that he believed the Indian soldiers depended on the trust of their British officers to perform in the army. We cannot be sure that he would not have said the same of British soldiers. However, that he says this specifically about Indian troops implies he believed Indian martial races were slow to adapt to change, and were put off by change to the extent they could not properly perform their duties. This shows the simplistic and racist perceptions of Raschen: he saw the Indians as fighting races and little more. He has high expectations of their bravery and sacrifice, but low expectations of everything else. His use of an animal metaphor to describe the Indians is particularly condescending. This perhaps shows a belief that the Indians were lesser forms of human life, a strong sign of British racial arrogance within his mindset. This can be seen when he discusses the organization in Mesopotamia in 1916, which he refers to as 'chaos'. He believes the reason for this to be because the Indian government rather than the British government was in control.<sup>127</sup>

*Sam's Soldiering* is the work of a man who was young and enthusiastic as an officer. He accepts perceptions of martial races without question. He writes with a cheerful and jovial tone about his exploits. There are several occasions in this work in which his language and memory suggest these aspects of his personality. He details disobeying orders so as to drink with his friends.<sup>128</sup> He discusses losing his

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<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

temper at a *babu* in charge of stores over an error, and violently attacking him.<sup>129</sup> Following this incident Raschen wrote that he told some of his superior officers 'exactly what [he] thought of their rotten show'.<sup>130</sup> Another example of this is his statement regarding the difficulty of commanding Indian soldiers, discussed above. He shows not just his racism, but also attacks the Indian Army's structure and policy. These examples show us something of Raschen's personality, which perhaps help to explain his approach to the Indian soldiers. The nature of his personality, writing and perceptions of the Indian soldiers differ greatly from that of Grimshaw. Grimshaw held some similar assumptions about the Indian soldiers to Raschen, but his deeply-felt experience of WW1 changed this. He appears to have learned from his experiences. Raschen has had few experiences, considering he is new to the Indian Army, and had only been in India since 1913. He is young, enthusiastic and brash. Perhaps more than any of the people in this study, he identifies with notions of British superiority and martial races.

### **The Diaries and Memoirs of Albert Pike**

Albert Pike served in the Indian Army from 1914-1925.<sup>131</sup> He was born in England in 1884, and lived in India for 10 years before joining the Indian Army at the beginning of the war. The notes used in this study are based on diary entries made at the time, which were written in Urdu, French and English, though the copies used here were typed in English in the 1950s and 1960s. He spent time in the Western Front, including the battle of the Somme, and then was moved to the Middle East where he fought in Palestine. The diaries and notes in this collection are relatively brief, but provide some insight into Pike's opinions.

We can learn something from the fact that sections of his memoirs were written in Urdu. He was clearly interested enough in Indian culture, not just to learn a

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<sup>129</sup> 'Babu' has different meanings. It can be a Hindu title of respect, or a 'native' clerk or official who wrote in English. The term could be applied disparagingly to a Hindu with a superficial English education (*OED*).

<sup>130</sup> Raschen, *Sam's Soldiering*, pp. 58-59.

<sup>131</sup> For information on the rank and service of A. Pike, See:

[http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc\\_Id=7879012](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/documentsonline/details-result.asp?queryType=1&resultcount=1&Edoc_Id=7879012), date accessed: Tuesday September 30, 2008

language, but also to use it ahead of English. There is further evidence to support this. For example, he describes a train ride with eighteen Indian officers, all of whom spoke Urdu:

We made Urdu the common language and I answered dozens of questions about London and what to do and not to do! ... On the train journey there were misgivings about the food at lunch, to some beef was tabu, to others pork an abomination, some complete vegetarians and so on.<sup>132</sup>

Pike again shows he was willing to talk primarily in Urdu. He also requested appropriate food for his officers. He was aware of differences in diet and was willing to accommodate these by ordering baskets of fruit, which shocked the French waiter.<sup>133</sup>

The tone of the work is interesting as well. He describes making weekend hunting plans with his Indian officers. He refers to Indian officers frequently by name. He describes in some detail a bet with 'X' over hunting: 'Discussing our week end plans with *Jemadar* Dost Mahomed I remarked that we would have to find a few score brace of really slow moving birds if we were ever to sting X for the port'.<sup>134</sup> Spending his leisure time with Indian officers certainly signals his friendship with them. He does not appear to discriminate in any way, except possibly when he uses terms common in the Indian Army, such as referring to Indian officers by their race, 'senior Rajput officer', for example.<sup>135</sup> This does not seem to be because of his personality or beliefs, but because of the environment he lived in. His description of his companions' reactions to this hunting trip gives a useful example: 'The Rajput officers accepted the "kill" with pleasant anticipation of roasted pork and savoury curries, to the Moslems it was of course the final work in uncleanness, such is the difference in religious teachings'.<sup>136</sup> His friendship with the Indian soldiers is a key aspect of his memory of the Indian Army. He wrote:

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<sup>132</sup> Memoires and notes of Albert Pike, '19<sup>th</sup> Indian Army 1914-18, War, Type Papers'. 1917 - Description of a train ride Departing from Amiens railway Station. No page numbers given.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, Description of a hunting expedition. No page numbers given. '*Jemadar*' is a rank for an Indian officer. See Omissi (ed.), *Indian voices*, pp. xxi-xxii (page numbers given in roman numerals).

<sup>135</sup> *Memoires of Albert Pike*. No page numbers given.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*



They were good days, we had plenty of congenial work, all the rough shooting anyone could desire, and that splendid camaraderie which no future generation of ours will ever know; the joys of West and East meeting in the friendly respect and mutual good fellowship of the old Indian Army days.<sup>137</sup>

Pike writes of both groups more as an independent observer than many others in this study. His descriptive language is never condescending and rarely relies on terms associated with martial races. He does not discuss honour or specific racial characteristics. Rather, he appears as more a detached observer, an individual curious about other cultures.

There are clearly many differences in the five accounts discussed here. How then, can we explain the differences in accounts between the commanding officers and the officers of lower-ranks? Part of the difference lies simply in the military hierarchy: junior officers fought with the Indians, commanding officers did not. Their leadership positions in the military hierarchy also help to explain why they saw the Indians in such broad stereotypes.<sup>138</sup> However, the reasons are more complex than this. Consider, for example, the two sources that identify least with British racial stereotypes: Pike and Grimshaw. These sources have much to set them apart from the others used in these two chapters: they are the only ones not written for a mass audience and they had the closest combat relationships with the Indian soldiers.<sup>139</sup> This suggests that the experience of combat, particularly on the Western Front, changed the perceptions of soldiers who fought with the Indian Army. Also, these were the two sources that were written for personal reasons. It is reasonable to infer, then, that they are the more reliable sources. Certainly, these are the most intimate and personal account of the war discussed.

As for WW1 as a transforming event, only Grimshaw's diary shows strong signs of changes in his opinion and language. This is partly because it is the only source produced that was not influenced by memory. He doubted the abilities and the

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<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>138</sup> Janowitz and Little, *Sociology and the Military*; Henderson, 'Race Relations'; Henderson, 'Leadership' and S. Andreski, *Military Organization and Society* (London, 1968), pp. 91-107.

<sup>139</sup> Raschen did spend time with the Indian soldiers on the Western Front, but was not heavily involved in fighting. Raschen, *Sam's Soldiering*, pp. 43-53.

minds of the Indians in his regiment to begin with, but by the end he had softened significantly. His language changed and his perceptions altered. These changes were not widespread across all sources, but that there is some evidence to suggest that the perceptions of the British officers were not set in stone.

What then, can we say of the arguments of previous scholars? Were the British officers ‘unashamedly racist’ as Greenhut argued?<sup>140</sup> This argument is not entirely inaccurate but it is simplistic, and provides little more than a starting point for a study. In these sources, we see varying degrees of racism and different types of racism. Pike is the clearest exception, as he interacted with the Indian soldiers on a more social level and did not doubt their ability. Pike mentions cultural differences between religious groups and ethnic groups, but does not see specific racial qualities in the way others do. Grimshaw’s perceptions changed over the period, but he still saw elements of racial characteristics.<sup>141</sup> While this stayed the same, his conception of the Indian soldier’s role in the Indian Army changed. He was uncomplaining about not seeing a ‘dead-level mask’ in the Indian soldiers. Pike and Grimshaw also have different perceptions of the Indians’ role in the army, compared to the others in this study. This is in stark contrast to Willcox’s belief that all the British officers would agree with him that the Indian officers should not hold high positions in the army.<sup>142</sup>

Conceptions of bravery tend to be quite common amongst all sources. Grimshaw does mention that he ‘knew [he] could depend on the Jodhpurs for reckless bravery.’<sup>143</sup> Alexander, as discussed in Chapter One, had very clear perceptions of what Indian bravery was, and when someone fell outside this conception, it was a man he referred to as ‘white’.<sup>144</sup> However, in Pike’s memoirs, there is nothing to suggest that he felt the Indian’s conception of bravery was irrational or ‘reckless’. In this case, the fact that he wrote nothing of it would suggest that he did not find it to be important. Still, there appears to be a broad common conception that the Indians were brave but reckless. However, this belief was not as firmly held as previous scholars have suggested.

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<sup>140</sup> Greenhut, ‘Sahib and Sepoy’, p. 16.

<sup>141</sup> Grimshaw, *Diary of Roly Grimshaw*, p. 54. Entry for Sunday 20 December, pp. 53-58.

<sup>142</sup> Willcox, *With The Indians*, p. 6

<sup>143</sup> Grimshaw, *Diary of Roly Grimshaw*, p. 34.

<sup>144</sup> Alexander, *On Two Fronts*, pp. 60-61.

The culture of imperialism in the Indian Army was strong, but not overwhelming. The institutionalised racism of the Indian Army was difficult for British officers to escape. Grimshaw's language was still wrapped up in the discourse of the British Empire and superiority, but his comments towards the end of his diary on showed that disillusionment with the war had changed his perceptions. This suggests that while racism was widespread, it was not nearly as strong among British junior officers in WW1 as it was with the commanders. War experience, rank and individual personality were all determining factors in how British officers perceived the Indian soldiers during WW1. These are factors which have until now been largely ignored.

To see belief in the Empire tested by WW1 gives a new perspective to the debates on Indianization and British perceptions of Raj, Empire and the Indians. My analysis suggests that the martial races discourse was present even in very sympathetic sources, like Pike and Grimshaw. This suggests that a belief in racial theories was common. Colonial ethnographers and the British Raj constructed 'martial races', but junior officers used its discourse as well as high-ranking officers. This supports Barua's argument on Indianization that martial races were genuinely believed in by the broader British Empire. He does not 'flaunt' his pro-British 'bias', but shows empathy for the British individuals, which other studies fail to do.<sup>145</sup> This also supports Greenhut's conclusion that racism was very widespread, but my analysis shows that there are serious flaws in this approach. The subtleties, changes and differences in the accounts discussed in this chapter are lost when writing on race relations in the Indian Army from a high command perspective. This is the difference between the basis of British civilian and military policy towards India and the individual perceptions of those who fought along side the actual Indian soldiers. The two affect each other, but are far from inseparable, as the use of different sources has shown. Racism is just one aspect of this relationship. The brutality of the combat does appear to have changed the perceptions of some of the officer corps. Exactly how common the attitudes of Grimshaw and Pike were at the time is difficult to tell. They may be isolated examples or they may be relatively common. While it is the

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<sup>145</sup> For this critique of Barua, see Deshpande, 'Gentlemen of the Raj', pp. 152-154.

case that the institutions of the Indian Army were inherently racist and that racial attitudes were prevalent, WWI experiences changed the perceptions of at least some of the people involved. Clearly some in the Indian army held genuine interests in Indian culture, while others' opinions were softened by the experience of combat. This point becomes even clearer when we consider the unchanging opinions of the commanding officers, who did not experience the war in the same way. There is a clear correlation between war experience, disillusionment and a softening of belief in British racial attitudes. Previous historiography has ignored this. My analysis suggests that WWI combat had a very strong effect on pre-1914 ideas. With the soldiers who fought beside the Indians on the Western Front, the belief in Empire and martial races is far less explicit. This is strong example of Metcalf's concept of 'difference' being broken down, with far less explicit focus on what divided the British and the Indians.

While the commanders were insulated from the changing effect of combat in WWI, the junior officers were not. The experience of war in the trenches forced upon their consciousness the essential unity of human beings. It has been pointed out in some of the previous historiography of WWI that the trench experience could break down class barriers.<sup>146</sup> Though historians are divided on the extent to which this is true, this study confirms that direct and shared experience of the horrors of the war can break down barriers of race constructed by the ideology of Empire. The maturity and experience with Indian culture also seems to have effected the change. Grimshaw and Pike had long experience in India, and developed more nuanced perceptions than the inexperienced Raschen. The difference between Grimshaw and Pike and the commanders, who also had experience of India, is direct combat experience in WWI.

The experience of WWI, through close proximity to the 'other', both emotional and physical and the universal human emotions, such as the fear of death, broke down the barriers of race. Faced with what truly unifies us as human beings, the artificial differences constructed by ideologies of Empire and race crumbled. Experience of this kind can challenge pre-conceptions about other people. This

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<sup>146</sup> For an example of this theme in the historiography, see: Winter, *Death's Men*. For a literary example of the war breaking down class barriers and unifying soldiers, see: F. Manning, *Her Privates We* (London, 1999).

explains the difference between the responses of the British commanders and the British junior officers. Different roles led to different experiences during the war. So we might expect to see a similar result when we turn to the experiences of the Indian soldiers.

## Chapter Three: Indian Soldiers

How did combat affect the ideals of the Indians? This chapter will deal with the ways in which Indian soldiers on the Western Front perceived the Empire, and the strength of their identification with its values. There are very few published primary sources by Indian soldiers in WWI. As a result, this chapter will focus on letters written by Indian soldiers. This means that there is less scope for detailed discussion of the perceptions of individuals, but broader trends can be established. I will focus on how the Indians saw their own role in the Indian Army; the extent to which they identified with *izzat* and Imperial loyalty and how these perceptions were affected by the experience of WWI. These letters focus on the Western Front, where the Indian infantry served from 1914-1915, while the cavalry remained until 1918.

The effect that WWI had on the Indian soldier's beliefs has not yet been studied, though exhaustive studies have been conducted of the British soldiers.<sup>147</sup> The traditional approach has been to focus on disillusionment arguing that soldiers' 1914 ideals, patriotism and enthusiasm for war were quickly washed away.<sup>148</sup> Much focus was initially placed on war poets, who portrayed much disillusionment with the war.<sup>149</sup> This approach has been criticised by 'revisionist' historians, who have argued that ideals were not as completely washed away. Hynes has argued that popular perceptions of the war in British culture are far too simplistic, and is very critical of the focus on war poets.<sup>150</sup> Sheffield wrote that morale was generally high, defended British high commands tactics and argued that the war has been forgotten as the success it was.<sup>151</sup> Many scholars also fall in between the two extreme approaches.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Watson, *Fighting Different Wars*. For works focused on the British lower classes in WWI, see: J. Bourne, 'The British Working Man in Arms, in Cecil and Liddle (eds) *Facing Armageddon*: pp. 336-352 and J. G. Fuller, *Troop Morale and Popular Culture in the British and Dominion Armies 1914-1918* (Oxford, 1990).

<sup>148</sup> For examples of such arguments, see: Winter, *Death's Men*; M. Ferro, *The Great War, 1914-1918* (London, 1973), pp. 85-97 and Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*.

<sup>149</sup> For studies of war poets see, for example: J. Lehmann, *The English Poets of the First World War* (London, 1982) and R. Giddings, *The War Poets* (London, 1988).

<sup>150</sup> S. Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York, 1991), pp. 423-463. For some other revisionist works, see: Bond, *The Unquiet Western Front*; J. Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War* (London, 1916); J. Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth-Century Warfare* (London, 1999) and Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*.

<sup>151</sup> Sheffield, *Forgotten Victory*.

Eksteins argues that while there was a lot of disillusionment, the soldiers were nearly always loyal.<sup>153</sup> Wilson surveys different sources, such as war poems and Fredrick Manning's *Her Privates We* to find many different views.<sup>154</sup> Manning's work finds the duality of WWI: focusing on both the horror and violence and a lust for revenge.<sup>155</sup>

Within this vast historiography, there are very few studies of Indian soldiers. David Omissi has edited a collection of over 600 letters by Indian soldiers, with very limited editorial notes, provides most the primary source material in this chapter.<sup>156</sup> He has also written a brief article on the cross-cultural relations within the Empire, discussing Indian soldiers' impressions of England and France during WWI.<sup>157</sup> Ellinwood has produced a large descriptive work on the diary of Amar Singh, a Rajput officer in the Indian Army between 1905-1921. Ellinwood shows how Singh straddled both worlds, positioned as he was between the Indian rankers and the British. He identified very strongly with the British officers, and, as an aristocrat, did not appear to think highly of many Indian soldiers.<sup>158</sup> This is an interesting approach, but Singh was far from representative of the Indian Army as a whole. Roy's discussion of recruitment to the Indian Army reveals that some were motivated by *izzat*, or perceived martial heritage and others were motivated by financial rewards.<sup>159</sup> This suggests that *izzat* and Empire did not motivate all Indian soldiers to begin with, but by financial factors. The British directed loyalty towards the King-Emperor, which was accepted differently by individual soldiers.<sup>160</sup> This discussion will look at

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<sup>152</sup> For such studies, see: J. Winter and B. Baggett, 1914-1918, *The Great War and the Shaping of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (London, 1996);, T. Wilson, *The Myriad Faces of War* (Oxford, 1986); T. E. Ashworth, 'The Sociology of Trench Warfare 1914-18', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 19, 4 (1986), pp. 407-423; S. Audoin-Rouzeau and A. Becker 14-18, *Understanding the Great War* (New York, 2002) and I. F. W. Beckett, *The Great War, 1914-1918* (New York, 2001). For a study of shell shock, see P. Leese, *Shell Shock; Traumatic Neurosis and the British Soldiers of the First World War* (Houndsmill, 2002).

<sup>153</sup> M. Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (London, 1989), pp. 171-191.

<sup>154</sup> Wilson, *Myriad Faces of War*, pp. 676-684.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.* See also Manning, *Her Privates We*.

<sup>156</sup> Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*.

<sup>157</sup> Omissi, 'Indian Eyes'.

<sup>158</sup> Ellinwood, *Between Two Worlds*, pp. 388-392. This section contains considerable quotes on Singh's thoughts on how the Indian soldiers acquitted themselves on the Western Front.

<sup>159</sup> Roy, *Brown Warriors*, pp. 303-707. See also: Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 1-46.

<sup>160</sup> Roy, *Brown Warriors*, p. 306. Nationalism would have been an awkward target for loyalty, as the army wished to disassociate from the Indian nationalist movement, and could not be directed at Britain or England either, as they were colonial subjects only. See Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 3-10. B. R. Tomlinson, *Political Economy of the Raj* (London, 1979), p. 106.

how they reacted to WWI, and what affect it had on their loyalty, *izzat*, and their relationship with the British Empire. VanKoski has produced a brief study of letters by Indian soldiers on the Western Front, which will also be used in this chapter. She argues that Indian soldiers were motivated by love of God, Government, King, and Empire. They were also influenced by the desire to win honour for family, caste, regiment and the army.<sup>161</sup> An Indian officer writes to another Indian officer:

Remember that the work you do now will gain for you a good name or a bad name which will last you the rest of your life ... You must always bear in mind your own honour and the honour of your family. There is nothing else in life better than honour.<sup>162</sup>

Another wrote on the behaviour of the 15<sup>th</sup> Lancers, who ‘mutinied’ in Mesopotamia, as they did not wish to fight fellow Muslims:

When I read about the behaviour of the regiment, I was overwhelmed with grief ... this is the time to show loyalty and give help to the Government and not to be false to one’s salt. It was to work for government and not for disobedience that they girded their loins and left their nearest and dearest ... I feel sure that you will remember your hereditary services and show yourself worthy of your family tradition.<sup>163</sup>

These letters show both the loyalty to the British government and a strong belief in honour. They show the nature of *izzat*: a pride in having done what was needed, that reflects on one’s self, and one’s family, for all the past, present and future. It can also be tied to the government and any identity that a soldier has. The mention of government shows that the author viewed the British Raj as a natural and accepted part of India. They connect the Raj to their own family life through honour and duty. This is a major part of VanKoski’s argument on the motivations of the Indian soldiers: that the British were able to tie the regimental *esprit de corps* to the values of the Punjab peasantry.<sup>164</sup> ‘Hereditary service’ implies that they believe their role in the Indian Army is part of a family connection with the British Empire. The findings of

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<sup>161</sup> VanKoski, ‘Punjabi Soldiers’, pp. 43-49.

<sup>162</sup> ‘Rissaldar Hoshiar Singh, Sikh, 16<sup>th</sup> Cavalry, Indian Expeditionary Force D, to Jamadar Harbant Singh, 9<sup>th</sup> Hodson’s Horse’, France, 10<sup>th</sup> November 1915, in VanKoski, ‘Punjabi Soldiers’, p. 45.

<sup>163</sup> ‘Kesu Shah, Punjabi Muslim, Rouen, France, to Rissaldar Abdul Rahim Khan, 15<sup>th</sup> Lancers, Mesopotamia’, 22 May 1916, in VanKoski, ‘Punjabi Soldiers’, p. 47. VanKoski placed emphasis on certain sections of the quote not intended by the original author. I have removed them in this copy.

<sup>164</sup> VanKoski, ‘Punjabi Soldiers’, p. 57.



VanKoski are useful, but also have limitations. She fails to discuss lack of motivation. Asking the question ‘what motivated Indian soldiers to fight?’ as VanKoski did, will find that they fought for Empire, honour and duty. But this question assumes that all Indians were motivated to fight. We cannot tell the depth and breadth of Indian motivation, or if there were changes throughout WWI. We have seen that British officers and commanders differed greatly in their views, largely because of different experiences of WWI. We might expect that Indian soldiers would differ in their views in similar ways for similar reasons. How, then, did the Indian identification with the concepts of *izzat*, martial races and Imperial ideology change when faced with combat on the Western Front?

The sources used to discuss these issues will be taken from Omissi’s collection of letters, *Indian Voices of the Great War*. These letters are organised chronologically and selected to be representative of the surviving material. There are only very limited editorial notes in this collection. Omissi notes three exceptions to this: where there are many letters expressing the similar sentiments, only a few are included and the common thread is flagged; he has included several letters of particular human or historical interest or of striking beauty; and the focus is on combat experience, rather than rear-echelon activities.<sup>165</sup> This does not present a problem for this study, though it is important to realise that these letters were selected with the aim of being representative. We must simply trust the editor when his notes identify a common theme in the letters. I will focus my discussion on letters from 1915 and 1916, as this is when the Indian Army had its largest numbers on the Western Front.<sup>166</sup>

It should be noted that these letters have been censored but, as Omissi argues, this limitation should not be overstated.<sup>167</sup> Most officers were too busy to censor letters in any great detail. Letters were rarely withheld and were rarely edited.<sup>168</sup> The letters in this collection themselves show how much passed through censorship. Furthermore, the aim of censorship was not so much to prevent the Indian soldiers

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<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>166</sup> See, for example, Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches*.

<sup>167</sup> See Omissi, ‘Europe Through Indian Eyes’, p. 382.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.* Omissi bases this discussion on the notes of the censor made at the time. The British were aware of the weakness of their censorship.

from communicating, but to gather information on morale and to ensure sensitive tactical information did not get out.<sup>169</sup> The thought that a letter is being read and censored may have had a larger effect on what was written, rather than the censorship itself.<sup>170</sup>

Omissi has described in some detail the motivational problems that faced the Indian Army during WWI.<sup>171</sup> At the beginning of the campaign, many soldiers became disillusioned and depressed. Omissi argues that this was because they were far from home in a brutal modern war that appeared to have no end in sight. Many soldiers were depressed when they were injured and were particularly disillusioned by having to return to the trenches once they had recovered.<sup>172</sup> Problems with morale following heavy losses were notably greater with Indian units than with the British.<sup>173</sup>

Despite morale problems, many soldiers wrote often about their desire to do their duty to the British government. They express this in terms of *izzat*. There are many examples of this in Omissi's collection. Some soldiers directly identify with notions of honour. One wrote that: 'To die in the battlefield is glory. For a thousand years one's name will be remembered ... it is our destiny to conquer'.<sup>174</sup> To understand *izzat* we must examine the religious beliefs of the soldiers.<sup>175</sup> That a belief in an afterlife made it easier for soldiers to continue fighting is a common theme in these letters. One soldier makes a direct connection between honour, death and religion, by writing: 'God is all powerful. He alone can protect one from death. The atheist never achieves *izzat*, and his mind is always unsettled. He never has any

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<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>170</sup> The issue of censorship is covered by Omissi and VanKoski, see: Omissi, 'Indian Eyes', pp. 382-383 and VanKoski, 'Punjabi Soldiers'.

<sup>171</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 113-152.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 116-118. This was a policy without precedent in the Indian Army.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>174</sup> Letter No. 87, Mohammad Ali Bey (Deccani Muslim) to Lance Dafadar Ranjit Singh (Depot, 20<sup>th</sup> Deccan Horse, Neemuch, Mindasok, Gwalior, Central India, June, 1915, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 73.

<sup>175</sup> For descriptions of the Hindu religion, see, P. Thomas, *Hindu Religion, Customs and Manners – Describing the Customs and Manners, Religious, Social and Domestic Life, Arts and Sciences of the Hindus* (Bombay, 1956), pp. 24-63. For further discussion of Hinduism, see V. Narayana, 'The Hindu Tradition', in W. G. Oxtoby (ed.), *World Religions – Eastern Traditions* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 12-125. For a discussion of Muslim notions of the afterlife, see M. Sedgwick, *Islam & Muslims - A Guide to Diverse Experience in a Modern World* (Boston, 2006), pp. 62-68. On Sikhism, for a recent overview see: W. G. Oxtoby, 'The Sikh Tradition', in Oxtoby, *Eastern Tradition*, pp. 126-159. On Sikh reincarnation, see G. Singh, *The Religion of the Sikhs* (London, 1971), particularly chapter 7 'Transmigration, Immortality & Deliverance', pp. 101-105.

consolation'.<sup>176</sup> Many soldiers saw death on the battlefield as a way of guaranteeing entry into heaven, rather than continuing the cycle of birth and rebirth on earth.<sup>177</sup> This might have made the experience of WWI easier to handle, if death is not final in the minds of the combatants.

When looking at the letters of Indian soldiers, it is easy to find very conflicting opinions of the war. Two Sikhs, for example, who seemingly had much in common, held very different perspectives. Both were from the Amritsar district. Both were wounded, and taken to hospital in England and they wrote within a week of each other. The first was suffering from pneumonia and wrote that the government was looking after him well, and that: 'it is our first duty to show our loyal gratitude to Government'.<sup>178</sup> The second was hit on his trigger finger, and was about to have it amputated. This letter speaks nothing of duty to the government. Rather, he wrote that: 'the battle is beginning and men are dying like maggots. No one can count them – not in thousands but in hundreds and thousands of thousands. No one can count them.'<sup>179</sup> He also wrote that as his finger was being amputated, he hoped to be sent home. These two men reacted to their experience of war in very different ways. It is possible that the second man had injured himself intentionally to escape combat, given his mindset and his injury.<sup>180</sup> Here we have one man, who having seen combat, still wished to do his duty to the government, and another who wished to be sent home, and may have even injured himself to ensure his safety. This suggests that the experience of combat was far more varied than VanKoski's article supposes.

Some soldiers, defying censorship, tell their friends and relatives not to sign up. An Indian officer, a *Havildar*, was a part of the censorship mechanism. His letter to a friend in the Punjab is a very telling one:

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<sup>176</sup> Letter No. 322, Pensioner Gholam Khan to Bugle Major Haq Nawaz Khan (Punjabi Muslim, 18<sup>th</sup> Lancers, France), 31<sup>st</sup> May, 1916 in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 191.

<sup>177</sup> See Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*. Letters No. 12, 17, 118 and 198 all express this sentiment.

<sup>178</sup> Letter No. 7, A Wounded Sikh to His Brother (Amritsar district, Punjab), 15<sup>th</sup> January 1915, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 28

<sup>179</sup> Letter No. 12, A Wounded Sikh to His Brother (Amritsar district, Punjab), 21<sup>st</sup> January, 1915 in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 31

<sup>180</sup> Greenhut, 'Imperial Reserve', pp. 57-58. Intentional injuring of the hand was a common way out of the trenches.

If you have any relatives, my advice is don't let them enlist. It is unnecessary to write any more. I write so much to you as I am *Pay Havildar* and read the letters to the double company commander. Otherwise there is a strict order against writing on this subject.<sup>181</sup>

This letter implies that the Indian officer upon whom the censorship relied was willing to send his own letter through as he was in a unique position to get around the censorship. This is unusual, as it is an Indian officer subverting the censorship, but the sentiment is quite common. Others sent coded messages, aware that censorship was in place, to their family urging them not to enlist. One man wrote to his brother: 'Think over what I say and you will understand what I mean when I say "stay in the village"'.<sup>182</sup> Upon a friend from his unit being injured, a Pathan wrote to him: 'wherever you go, do not straighten your back. Then, please God, something good will come of it ... I wish to impress this upon you as strongly as I can ... do not straighten your back. Your position is a very good one'.<sup>183</sup> He implored the injured man to exaggerate the extent of his back injury so that he would be sent home. These types of actions were clearly not just isolated examples. They show that *izzat* was not the main goal for all the Indian soldiers. Either their loyalties were not strong to begin with, or they had been completely changed by disillusionment with WWI.

One man was clearly angry about his situation, but directed his anger not at the Germans or the British, but rather at his wife. He wrote to her: 'We perish in the desert: you wash yourself and lie in bed. We are trapped in a net of woe, while you go free. Our life is a living death. For what great sin are we being punished?''<sup>184</sup> Two letters written in January and February 1915 portray another reaction to the combat. When reading these letters, one would not know for certain which side the Indians were on since they show no malice towards the Germans, and give little praise to the British. The scale and kind of the combat appear to have fostered this belief. One wounded soldier wrote: 'here the state of things is such that all the world over there will be two women for each man. This you must think over till you understand it. All

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<sup>181</sup> Letter No. 67 Havildar Abdul Rahman (Punjabi Muslim to Naik Rajwali Khan (31<sup>st</sup> Punjabis, Fort Sandeman, Zhob District, Baluchistan), 20<sup>th</sup> May 1915, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 61.

<sup>182</sup> Letter No. 22, A Wounded Sikh to his Brother, 14<sup>th</sup> of February 1915, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 37.

<sup>183</sup> Letter No. 103, Khan Muhammad (40<sup>th</sup> Pathans to Sher Jang (40<sup>th</sup> Pathans, a hospital, France), 26<sup>th</sup> July, 1915, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 81.

<sup>184</sup> Letter No. 146, Sant Singh (Sikh) to his Wife, 18<sup>th</sup> September, 1915, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 102. The original author's emphasis, not mine. This letter was suppressed.

the kings have been ruined.<sup>185</sup> This is a long letter, which talks of both the English and the British, without any emotive language, either positive or negative. Another wrote that he was ‘greatly distressed in mind’ because of the war.<sup>186</sup> He was shocked that the British would send men back to the front after they had been wounded and concerned the war would go on for many years.<sup>187</sup> There is no enthusiasm in this writing; they have a completely different tone to those that discuss *izzat* directly. They may not have lost their attachment to the empire, it is quite possible they lacked enthusiasm to begin with.

However, others are quite enthusiastic. One soldier in France urges another soldier in the Punjab to get more recruits: ‘this is not time for slackness. Consider the way in which the whole country is exerting itself and doing its duty.’<sup>188</sup> Another was enthusiastic about France and England, particularly about the possibility of travel:

‘What am I to say to you about England? May God grant victories to our King. If I were to set about writing down the praises of Marseilles, my hand would be wearied with writing. Further, I went to Paris for seven days. What is Paris? It is heaven!’<sup>189</sup>

Even the death of friend did not always shake the opinions of soldiers who strongly believed in *izzat* and the British cause. One wrote of such an event:

‘He was buried in a Muslim cemetery near London with great honour and dignity. The exalted Government has showered every blessing on us here, which I shall remember all my life, and which will bind me in complete loyalty.’<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> Letter No. 19, A Wounded Garhwali to his Elder Brother, 12<sup>th</sup> February, 1915, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 36.

<sup>186</sup> Letter No. 23, A Wounded Garhwali to his Guru, 17<sup>th</sup> February, 1915, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 38.

<sup>187</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>188</sup> Letter No. 263, Peshawar Singh (Sikh) to Sirdar Mahindar Singh (19<sup>th</sup> Lancers, Sialkot District, Punjab), 9<sup>th</sup> March, 1916, in Omissi, *Indian Voices*, p. 161.

<sup>189</sup> Letter No. 260, Mahomed Firoz Din (Punjabi Muslim) to Firoz Khan (19<sup>th</sup> Lancers, Sialkot, Punjab), 7<sup>th</sup> March, 1916, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 160.

<sup>190</sup> Letter No. 215, Muhammad Hussein Khan (Punjabi Muslim) to Lumberdar Said Hafiz Khair Muhammad (Jullundur, Punjab, India), 10<sup>th</sup> January 1916, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 136.

This letter shows a very strong belief in honour, tied to the British Empire. It is important to note that both letters above were written in 1916, after spending considerable time in the war.

One soldier commented on his joy in another Garhwali winning the Victoria Cross: 'the fame of the Garhwalis is now higher than the skies. On the Garhwalis ... has won the honour of the Victoria Cross and, having made the reputation of his family for three generations, has arrived in Lansdowne.'<sup>191</sup> This shows that the honour of one man was extended to his family and his ethnicity. This is a conception of *izzat* that the British wished to inspire and one similar to that of General Willcox.<sup>192</sup>

The conditions of the war were also met with very contrasting opinions. One soldier wrote: 'I swear by God that, since your letter came, I have eaten and drunk but little and have had no sleep.'<sup>193</sup> Only two weeks later, another soldier wrote: 'The arrangements of our benign government are deserving of all praise. We receive everything in plenty – clothes and food, and all things that are necessary. We want for nothing – do not be anxious.'<sup>194</sup> In the former letter, there is a sense of the soldier trying to reassure his audience. He may be putting a brave face on, so as not to worry them. Despite this, he refers to the government as 'benign', presenting a very positive vision of British Government of India. Clearly the first author was not concerned with this, which shows his fragile state of mind at the time. These are further examples of very different reactions to WWI.

Following the departure of the infantry in early 1916, only the Indian cavalry remained on the Western Front. From this point onwards, the letters more frequently speak favourably of *izzat*, Empire and loyalty, rather than ambivalence or depression.<sup>195</sup> This is because the cavalry had seen very little action leading up to

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<sup>191</sup> Letter No. 29, Bigya Singh (Garhwali) to a Friend, 15<sup>th</sup> March, 1915, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>192</sup> Omissi *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 78-80. On General Willcox, see p. 7.

<sup>193</sup> Letter No. 278, Abdur Rahman Khan (Deccani Muslim) to Malik Mahomed Sultan Nawaz Khan (Hyderabad, India), 28<sup>th</sup> March 1916, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 169.

<sup>194</sup> Letter No. 306, Mahomed Usuf Khan (Punjabi Muslim) to Mahomed Ismail (Hissar District, Punjab), 8<sup>th</sup> May, 1916, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 182.

<sup>195</sup> Low morale on the Western Front is discussed in: Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. 114-125. While 1916 is considered a major turning point for morale on the Western Front, disillusionment arrived earlier for the Indian soldiers. On wider issues of morale in the British Army see, for example, G.

1916. They had been given a slower initiation to the war and were heavily involved in the fighting.<sup>196</sup> The cavalrymen appear to have accepted the difficulties of combat, but are still determined to do their job. A good example is a cavalryman warning a friend of the dangers of enlisting: 'do not say after two or three months that you are unable to serve or unable to ride ... unless one's heart is in one's work one cannot perform it properly'.<sup>197</sup> There are still concerns about pay and conditions. One soldier's wife wrote to him: 'Now I have had to pawn my jewellery to keep myself alive. The order has now been issued that we are to get only half the usual allowance. How am I to live on Rs.2.8 a month?'<sup>198</sup> The censor noted at this time that this was a very common concern.<sup>199</sup>

It is impossible to show that an individual did not have a belief in the British Empire by the lack of enthusiasm in one letter. A letter is but a snapshot of a person's mentality in one moment in time. Yet, these letters are all the evidence that we have. If disillusionment, ambivalence or anger comes through in a letter rather than a concern for honour or duty, we must accept this as being more powerful in the individual's mind at the time of writing. As these themes come through frequently, we cannot make the argument that the Indian soldiers were motivated by honour and duty, because clearly many of them no longer believed in these. We should bear in mind what has been discussed in the first two chapters of this study. Some of the British officers, such as Willcox and Alexander, believed the role of the Indian soldiers was to be completely loyal. Some of the Indians saw this as their role too, as we have already seen from a number of examples. The British would often regard the Indians as undifferentiated and unified groups with specific characteristics. This is only evidence of British perceptions, rather than an accurate description of Indian ethnic groups. One lesson from the deeply contrasting viewpoints of the Indian soldiers is to show the simplicity of British perceptions could be.

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Sheffield, 'Officer-Man Relations, Discipline and Morale in the British Army', in Cecil and Liddle, *Facing Armageddon*, pp. 413-425; Winter, *Death's Men* pp. 80-140.

<sup>196</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, p. 115.

<sup>197</sup> Letter No. 316, Gholam Mustafa (Punjabi Muslim) to Mahomed Akbar Khan (c/o Mehr Baksh, Shopkeeper, Bombay, India), 22 May 1916, in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 188.

<sup>198</sup> Letter No. 233, Nur Muhammad on behalf of the wife of Din Muhammad to Din Muhammad (Hindustani Muslim, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lancers, France), in Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 146.

<sup>199</sup> See Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, p. 146. Editorial notes on letter no. 233.

Clearly, from these letters we can see that the concept of *izzat* was not so all encompassing for the Indian Soldiers as VanKoski's article argued. *Izzat* was something to live up to, but in many cases, these letters suggest that it was far from universal, its breadth and depth is questionable. Often, when writing to family members, soldiers would write on how appalling the war was and make no mention of having to do their duty of honour. Instead, they were weary soldiers who felt that they had to continue doing what they were doing, as they had no other option.

Letters rarely mention Indian Army structures or perceptions of British officers. This is partly due to self-censorship and the fact that they are more concerned with day-to-day issues, such as survival.<sup>200</sup> This is may be partly because the editor of the collection was focused on the war experience.<sup>201</sup> Lack of comment on individual officers may suggest that the Indians saw the British as a broad and unified group, as many of the British saw the Indians. This is speculative to some extent, as the sources lack specifics, but it appears reasonable. Disrespect for army rules, such as attempting self-injury or encouraging family members or friends not to sign up, shows that many soldiers did not identify strongly with Indian Army discipline or *izzat*. Those who were undisciplined do not appear to have done so for any reason other than disillusionment with WWI. The soldiers who happily accepted discipline and *izzat* clearly were not bothered by their position.<sup>202</sup> This acceptance of racial attitudes was not changed by disillusionment with WWI. This is not surprising, as they were recruited from backward areas, many were poorly educated and illiterate, and had no links with the nationalist movement.<sup>203</sup>

What we see are different levels of attachment to the Empire; some seem to believe in *izzat*, others do not. Some of those who did not believe in it may never have, others may have lost it as a consequence of the war experience. Some soldiers showed remarkable persistence in holding strong belief in notions of duty and honour. There are many examples of the extreme reactions to WWI: those who tried to injure

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<sup>200</sup> Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, pp. 1-22 and VanKoski, 'Punjabi Soldiers'.

<sup>201</sup> Omissi, (ed.), *Indian Voices* pp. xxiii-xxiv.

<sup>202</sup> Many letters from the period do remark on how impressed the Indians were with European culture and technology. See particularly Omissi, 'Indian Eyes', and VanKoski, 'Punjabi Soldiers'.

<sup>203</sup> Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, pp. Many soldiers who were illiterate were still able to send letters, by paying someone else to write them, often done in major cities such as Paris. See Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, pp. 1-22.



themselves to escape, or urged others not to sign up, and those who felt strong connections to the Empire and the British cause. Again, this is partly because this study is based on an edited collection, which, while broadly representative, picks out the most interesting responses to the war. Many letters in this collection do not express a strong belief either way; they are concerned largely with day-to-day issues, such as survival, living conditions and the financial situation of their family.

As was seen in the Chapters One and Two, there were different responses to WWI. There are different levels of attachment to the British Empire and the British cause in WWI. It would be impossible from this collection of letters to frame a 'traditional' argument about the response of soldiers to WWI. The pre-1914 ideals of Indian soldiers were clearly not washed away entirely. Concepts of *izzat* and Empire still resonated strongly in some sources, even among some letters from some letters late in the Indian campaign on the Western Front in 1916.<sup>204</sup> In the sources that identify strongly with *izzat* there appears to be a felt personal connection to the Empire and the British cause. These soldiers tie the ideals of *izzat* to those of British Empire. The strength of these ideals can also be explained through some soldiers' religious beliefs, such as reincarnation or an afterlife. This helped to remove or lessen the fear of death, which was identified among British officers in Chapter Two as being a key factor in changing previously held ideals of Empire.

When belief in religion, *izzat* and the British Empire were in alignment, the soldiers' ideals withstood the test of combat. We should bear in mind that the Indian Army did not fight at the Somme, with the exception of some cavalry units. Had the army stayed on longer, there may have been more widespread disillusionment among both the British officers and Indian soldiers, as has been identified in studies of British soldiers.<sup>205</sup> While some Indian soldiers felt their belief in the British government, Empire and *izzat* were strong during combat, others were battle-weary, depressed and sought a way out. Those who remained loyal, as with the experience of the commanders, experienced combat in a different way, with less fear for their own lives. They would not have seen any strong reason to change their ideals. We can

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<sup>204</sup> See letters No. 260 and 215 in, Omissi (ed), *Indian Voices*, pp. 136 and 160.

<sup>205</sup> The Somme was some of the most brutal combat in WWI, and has generally been considered a turning point for morale on the Western Front. On the Somme see:

conclude from these sources that the pre-1914 ideals of the Indian soldiers were severely tested by WWI, but that there was no common experience of disillusionment.

## Conclusion: The Test of the First World War

This thesis has examined the affect of WWI on the pre-1914 ideals of the Indian Army. The comparisons of the three groups discussed; commanders, junior officers and Indian soldiers, show much about how different beliefs were influenced by war experiences.

The commanding officers belief in the Empire and their conservative views on structure of the Indian Army were maintained throughout the war. Their pre-war conceptions of Empire and the Indian soldiers do not appear to have changed much from their experience of WWI. The junior officers opinions changed, though not present in all sources, towards a more sympathetic view of the Indian soldier, out of step with the imperial ideology of their commanders. The Indian soldier's perceptions of the Empire were tested by WWI, but did not change evenly, partly due to the strength of some soldiers religious and cultural beliefs.

This tells us that the strength of an individual's pre-war conceptions, their position in the army and their experience of WWI were the key factors in shaping their perceptions of the Empire. The experience of commanders, for example, was shaped by their high position. They had to remain detached from their men, whose lives their strategy endangered. Their preconceptions of the men as members of a fierce fighting race made this detachment easier. They had little direct contact with the Indian soldiers, a role left to the British junior officers.<sup>206</sup> They also did not spend time in the trenches with the Indians soldiers. This removed them from the dangerous environment. However, the British junior officers and the Indian soldiers fought together in the trenches, and this appears to have changed their perceptions quite frequently. The British junior officers that had their perceptions of the Indians change, Grimshaw and Pike, both spent a great amount of time on the Western Front, and write of direct contact with the Indians.

The Indian soldiers had different reactions to the war. those whose personal cultural and religious ideologies were in alignment with the ideologies of Empire and

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<sup>206</sup> This is remarked upon directly by Willcox. Willcox, *With The Indians*, p. 6

martial races: and those whose personal belief systems did not reinforce the ideology of Empire. This group's experience was similar to the experience of the junior officers, in that the death and disillusionment overcame any strong sense of connection to Empire. Many Indian soldiers wrote of their desire to die in combat, as it would lead to heaven or that they felt compelled to fight so as to fulfil their family legacy, or for their family's *izzat*. This shows us that experience can challenge ideology, but if an individual's personal beliefs are aligned with the prevailing ideology those preconceptions may remain intact – even in the face of the often-overwhelming horror of war.

A study of these issues has not previously been completed about the Indian Army. The results support the 'revisionist' perspective on the trench experience, by showing that many soldiers, in this case particularly Indians soldiers, were able to maintain their pre-1914 ideals. This being said, there was also much disillusionment with both the war and the ideals of Empire and *izzat*, suggesting that there was no universal experience of war for the Indian soldiers. These findings also show the previous historiography on the race relations within the Indian Army are too simplistic. This is the first study to look at these issues from the perspective of the British junior officers in WWI. This has revealed that the junior officers opinions, largely as a result of WWI combat with the Indian soldiers had become more complicated and sympathetic than those of their more detached commanders.

Further study of this subject could focus on further primary source material, particularly from the British junior officers and the Indian soldiers. A broader study of Indian soldiers in WWI, using letters and other primary sources could better distinguish what the most common response to WWI. Likewise, there are more primary sources from British officers in the Indian Army in WWI, on the Western Front and in the Middle East, held in the Liddle collection of Leeds University.<sup>207</sup> These could be used to examine in greater detail how the British officers perceived the Indian soldiers, and how these perceptions were changed by combat experience in WWI. This thesis has

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<sup>207</sup> To search this archive, visit the Leeds University website:  
<http://www.leeds.ac.uk/library/spcoll/liddle/>, date accessed Tuesday October 21, 2008.

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